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West faces long odds in bid against Abbott

Governor holds major fundraising advantage, support from Trump and strong poll numbers

By **Jeremy Wallace**
AUSTIN BUREAU

Republican Allen West has made a political career out of ignoring conventional thinking and taking on long odds.

While that approach helped the conservative firebrand get elected to Congress in Florida during the 2010 tea party wave and become chairman of the Re-

publican Party of Texas a decade later, his latest move may be his tallest task yet: taking on Gov. Greg Abbott.

In a long expected step, West announced on July 4 that he was entering the fray against Abbott in the GOP primary. The incumbent has a massive fundraising advantage, strong poll numbers, superior name recognition and the backing of former President Don-



West

ald Trump. Still, West said in television interviews that he is not intimidated by the task ahead. “When David took on Goliath, he just had three little stones and dropped Goliath,” West, 60, said in an interview on Fox News Channel last week. “So I’m not worried about the size of anyone’s war chest or who they have behind them.”

While Abbott’s campaign has

previously insisted it is taking nothing for granted in 2022, its internal polling, which was obtained by the Houston Chronicle, shows little cause for concern so far. Polling conducted in June shows 87 percent of Republican primary voters approve of the job Abbott has done, according to Public Opinion Strategies.

“Abbott’s high marks on the issues put him in a dominant position against any Republican challenger,” according to an internal polling memo.

At first glance, it is hard to see

West’s path to victory in a GOP primary, said Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston.

As a statewide officeholder for 25 years – and having led the state’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic for a year and a half – Abbott, 63, has greater name recognition than any potential challenger and more than \$50 million in his campaign account to fend them off.

But Rottinghaus said there is no doubt West brings something to
West continues on A6

Memorial Park upgrades spark push for safe access



Runners with the Kung Fu Running Club make it through traffic after crossing Westcott on Blossom near Memorial Park. Runners say the crossing is made difficult by vehicle speeds and a lack of a signal or nearby signs.

Michael Wyke / Contributor

Advocates think more is needed to make easy passage a reality for cyclists and runners

By **Dug Begley**
STAFF WRITER

Cody Foster knows how tough it can be to cross Westcott on Blossom, just steps from Memorial Park.

Driving south on Westcott once, Foster recalls having to slam the brakes to avoid hitting a boy on a bicycle who darted in front of his car.

On Wednesday it was Foster, out on a run near his

apartment, carefully looking both ways before venturing onto Westcott toward Memorial Park.

“This is the only entrance that is somewhat safe, but yeah, it could be better,” he said.

A \$200 million-plus plan to improve the park is aimed at making it a signature destination for all Houstonians. With that success, though, will come the same challenges anything

popular in Houston faces: How will people get there, where will they park and what can be done to give them an option other than driving?

A variety of projects are planned or proposed to offer safer or additional options, including new bike paths, wider sidewalks, even a possible Metropolitan Transit Authority hub to rapid buses. All of the ideas, however, are years

away and still face some public scrutiny that could alter the plans.

Efforts to create or expand trails follow what has been the largest park investment in a generation – a \$70 million land bridge that creates a hillside through which Memorial Drive passes, connecting the park’s north and south sides.

About 6,300 vehicles a
Park continues on A6

Branson, crew fly to space in his ship

By **Susan Montoya Bryan**
and **Marcia Dunn**
ASSOCIATED PRESS

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES, N.M. – Swashbuckling billionaire Richard Branson hurtled into space aboard his own winged rocket ship Sunday, bringing astro-tourism a step closer to reality and beating out exceedingly richer rival Jeff Bezos.

The nearly 71-year-old Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space tourism company reached an altitude of 53.5 miles over the New Mexico desert – enough to experience three to four minutes of weightlessness and witness the curvature of the Earth – and then glided to a runway landing.

“The whole thing, it was just magical,” a jubilant Branson said after the trip home aboard the gleaming white space plane, named Unity.

The brief up-and-down flight – the space plane’s portion took only about 15 minutes, or about as long as Alan Shepard’s first U.S. spaceflight in 1961 – was a splashy and unabashedly commercial plug for Virgin Galactic, which plans to start taking paying customers on joyrides next year.

Branson became the first person to blast off in his own spaceship, beating Bezos, the richest person on the planet, by nine days. He also became only the second septuagenarian to go into space. Astronaut John Glenn flew on the space shuttle at age 77 in 1998.

Bezos sent his congratulations, adding: “Can’t wait to join the club!” – though he also had taken to Twitter a couple of days earlier to enumerate the ways in which he believes his company’s rides will be better.

With about 500 people watching, including Branson’s family, Unity was carried aloft underneath a twin-fuselage aircraft. At
Branson continues on A11

Houstonian celebrated for breaking barriers as one of first Black Marines

By **St. John BARNED-SMITH**
STAFF WRITER

The men stood in rapt formation and called Cpl. Arthur Jackson to attention for perhaps the first time since he left the U.S. Marine Corps 75 years ago.

Bemused, the 99-year old man stepped to his feet and walked across the lawn of his daughter’s house in Spring to the three waiting Marines.

He may be aged and bald now, but he’s just as lean as when he

joined the Marines as a 19-year-old in 1942. He stood quietly as they recognized his role as one of the first Black Marines in America and received a replica Congressional Gold Medal awarded to all “Montford Point Marines” by President Barack Obama in 2012.

“It’s wonderful,” he said. “It’s something I’m proud of.”

Jackson, who turned 99 last week, was born in Bellville and grew up in Houston’s Studewood neighborhood.

In 1942, with the world at war, Jackson signed up to fight. He had a brother in the Navy and another in the Air Force. He chose the U.S. Marine Corps.

His decision came a year after President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order banning discrimination because of “race, creed, color or national origin” in government agencies, including the armed services.

Black men had served in other branches with distinction for
Marine continues on A11



Melissa Phillip / Staff photographer

Marine Capt. Ibrahim Diallo and Maj. Courtney Boston present Arthur Jackson, 99, with a replica Congressional Gold Medal.

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FROM THE COVER

PARK

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day use Memorial through the park, according to 2019 traffic counts by Houston Public Works.

As Memorial Park's popularity swelled during the pandemic – notably to the new Eastern Glades area where running and walking trails abound for socially distanced exercise – competition for parking spaces has soared. After a few circles, unlucky folks such as Phillip Williams, 41, may find a spot along the street in the nearby neighborhood.

"I'd hate to see them put in more parking," Williams said. "It's a park, but this is Houston. ... People are going to drive to the park."

Remedying that depends on the development of options other than driving for those interested in running or biking, which means confronting the fact that many parts of the surrounding neighborhoods are hard to traverse on bike or on foot.

"We're going to spend all this money – and I'm supportive, the park is great – but when it comes to getting a safe crossing, I keep hearing we cannot afford it or there haven't been enough accidents yet," said state Sen. John Whitmire, who lives near the park and has sought improvements at Blossom and Westcott. "That's just not acceptable."

Getting away from cars

One of the biggest challenges to improving access to Memorial is the big roads that border it: Loop 610 and Interstate 10. Running along the west and north edges of the park, the freeways are a barrier where the freeway intersections with Washington Avenue to the northeast and Memorial and Woodway to the west can be chaotic for cyclists and pedestrians.

"What we want is a safe, easy, biking solution," said Bob Ethington, director of research and economic development for the Uptown Houston District.

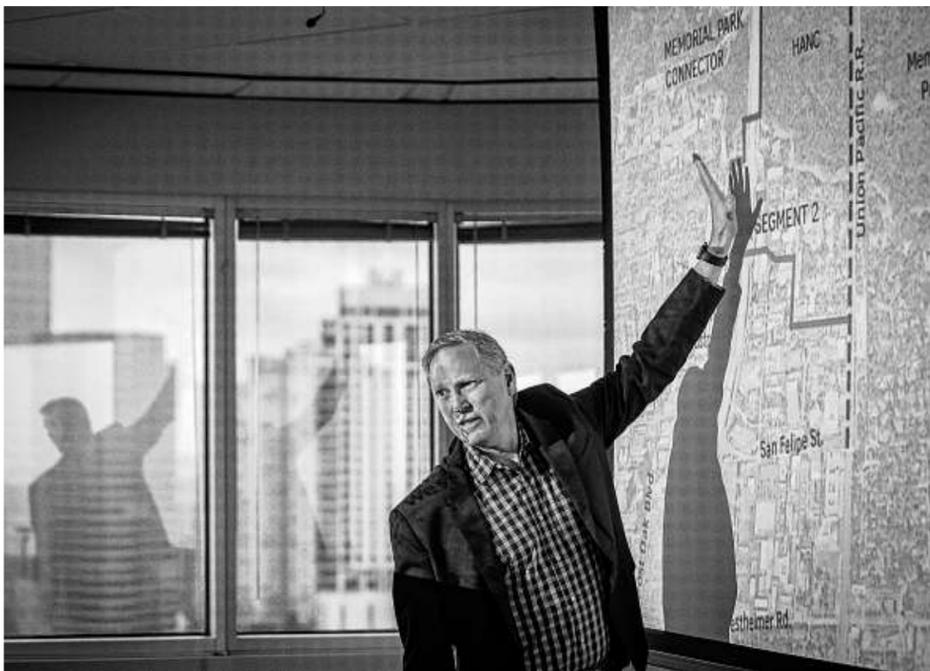
Ethington said along Loop 610, officials are considering how best to get runners and cyclists as far away from cars as practical. Those plans include a connection from the south, parallel to the Union Pacific Railroad tracks as far south as San Felipe.

The trail skirts a rail line south of the park, in the River Oaks area dotted with some of the most expensive homes within Loop 610. Other projects could follow, taking the trail as far as Brays Bayou and creating what could become a freeway of sorts for bicyclists between two popular bayou routes.

The key connection to the heart of Uptown, on the other side of Loop 610, is a planned trail running near the top of Uptown Park Boulevard, where it curves into the southbound frontage road, that will follow Buffalo Bayou beneath the clatter of 16 lanes of traffic above.

That connection, which could include a new bridge strictly for the trail across the bayou, would eliminate a stress-inducing street crossing for cyclists and runners at Woodway.

"The corner is terrible and the (Loop 610) underpass is not



Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

Bob Ethington, director of research and economic development for the Uptown Houston District, said officials are considering how best to get runners and cyclists going to Memorial Park as far away from cars on Loop 610 as practical.



Source: Metro

Staff graphic

great," said Randy Odinet, vice president of capital projects and facilities for the Memorial Park Conservancy.

The Uptown work, which follows Briar Hollow in the neighborhood south of Buffalo Bayou, recently received a boost, when \$4 million of the \$5.3 million price tag was included in the House version of a federal infrastructure bill at the request of Rep. Lizzie Fletcher, D-Houston, who represents the area.

For travelers headed to the park from the east, two planned projects could help. Construction is set to start in about 20 months on a new bike lane spliced through a narrow piece of public land on the south side of Interstate 10. The Texas Department of Transportation project would eliminate a broken link between the Heights and Shepherd corridors and Memorial Park, caused by I-10.

Now, cyclists can use the

Heights Hike and Bike Trail and White Oak Trail to access the Cottage Grove neighborhood north of I-10, then a pedestrian bridge atop I-10 at Cohn. About a half-mile from the park at the end of the Cohn crossing, however, is where the easy access stops. The Union Pacific Railroad tracks and nearby streets force runners back to TC Jester, which many avoid because of the heavy traffic and truck volumes and high speeds.

Bus route for park

Design of the TxDOT project is not finalized, but the work likely will include a trail along the south side of I-10 from Cohn to Washington, through a slice of state-owned right of way and beneath the UP tracks. At Washington, it is expected to cross at the intersection and into the park.

The project also will replace the Cohn bridge with a wider span and assorted street-level improvements north of I-10 along

the frontage road.

Most Houston residents and travelers, however, cannot simply hop on a bike and get to the park. Current transit offerings are limited to three bus routes, two of which come every 30 minutes. The third, the Route 85 Antoine/Washington that skirts the eastern edge of the park, is the only frequent route, coming every 15 minutes. More than a dozen bus routes pull into the Northwest Transit Center less than 2,500 feet away from the park, but those 2,500 feet are impassable because of the I-10 interchange with Loop 610.

A planned bus rapid transit route along I-10, however, could radically improve access if Metro were to include a stop at the park. Metro officials, while not committing, said they are considering a possible stop at Washington on the park's boundary.

The idea of a Memorial Park station has drawn interest from

transit riders and officials. Often, transit is built and discussed in terms of moving people solely to jobs and schools, Metro board member Sanjay Ramabhadran said.

"It is also about getting us to recreation facilities, parks," Ramabhadran said.

Plans for the BRT line include an elevated busway along I-10 so large buses can move in their own lanes from the Northwest Transit Center to downtown Houston. Transit officials plan various public meetings before any station decision is made.

"You cannot order a BRT corridor on Amazon and have it delivered next week," Ramabhadran said.

Various agencies and groups – the park conservancy, Uptown, TxDOT and city officials – also must cooperate. Because of existing boundaries and rules about where they can spend different piles of tax and donated dollars, none of the agencies can tackle the transportation landscape around the park alone.

"For us anticipating those access points is in our plan," Odinet said of the conservancy. "Building them out is not part of our scope."

The efforts, however, have not gone far enough for some nearby residents, runners and cyclists. Pedestrian crossings can be complex along Loop 610 where traffic is moving at frontage-road speeds and often not looking for people using crosswalks. East of the park, Westcott and Washington remain a barrier.

Many avoid the traffic circle where Washington and Westcott meet and nearby crossings, such as Schuler to the north and Blossom south of the roundabout, can be harrowing. Samantha Peters, 26, who runs to the park four or five days a week, said it often is hard to see cars and trucks approaching, and few drivers seem aware they should be looking for pedestrians.

Drivers and runners who use the street said it is easy to see that some sort of traffic signal or flashing signs and a painted crosswalk could do some good.

"A pedestrian light would be nice," said Hung Cao, president of the Kung Fu Running Club, a group associated with a bar along Washington. "Anything that lets the drivers know."

Odinet agreed several crossings along Westcott warrant improvement.

"Right now, none of them are ideal," he said.

Houston officials, who are working to remedy decades of insufficient pedestrian access around the city, note they have a backlog of projects and are prioritizing locations where the most incidents have occurred and funding can be spread across the sprawling city.

"It just frustrates me to see what any reasonable person can forecast: We are going to have and already have life-threatening situations," Whitmire said. "The word I get back is, there haven't been enough accidents, which drives me crazy."

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WEST

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the table that Abbott has not contended with in the past.

"His strength is an outside-the-box political campaign style that Abbott has never seen before," Rottinghaus said.

Abbott avoided primary challenges when he ran three times for attorney general and faced only token opposition in his two primary campaigns for governor.

And Abbott has more than West to worry about on his right flank. Former state Sen. Don Huffines of Dallas also announced he's running for governor and has already released campaign ads and dotted Texas highways with billboards vowing to do more to fight illegal immigration and to cut property taxes.

West is campaigning on reining in the governor's use of emergency powers, such as during a pandemic; using the Texas National Guard and Texas State Guard more on the border to fight illegal immigration; and examining the feasibility of eliminating property taxes.

Dems waiting on O'Rourke

Those primary challenges come as Democrats wait to see if former U.S. Rep. Beto O'Rourke of El Paso will run for governor. O'Rourke has already hosted rallies in front of the Capitol and blasted Abbott's handling of the

state's power grid. The grid broke down during a cold snap in February, leaving millions in the dark and without heat and killing more than 200 Texans.

Some local officials in the Houston area have also sharply criticized Abbott's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, from a spring 2020 reopening that he quickly backtracked on after infections began spiking to blocking local efforts to limit public activities. More than 52,000 Texans have died from the coronavirus.

O'Rourke has not ruled out running for governor and has been crisscrossing the state holding rallies akin to his 2018 U.S. Senate campaign, in which he came within 3 percentage points of defeating Republican U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz for re-election.

Abbott, meanwhile, has been preparing for 2022 by shoring up his GOP base of support. In the last two months, Abbott has picked up a formal – and public – endorsement from Trump. And just last month Trump and Abbott spent hours together on the Texas border professing their admiration for one another.

"I gave him a complete and total endorsement," Trump said on June 30, with Abbott by his side. "You've done a great job and I'm going to be with you."

Still, West, whose term as state GOP chairman ended, has been undeterred. He has used the post to speak his mind and to be a thorn in the side of some elected

"(West's) strength is an outside-the-box political campaign style that Abbott has never seen before."

Brandon Rottinghaus, UH political science professor

Republicans in Texas, including Abbott.

Stirring the pot

He's been critical of Abbott's use of executive orders during the pandemic and even took part in rallies outside the governor's mansion in Austin. West called Abbott's order a form of "the tyranny that we see in the great state of Texas." He's also called House Speaker Dade Phelan a "traitor" for seeking the support of Democrats and accused Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick of holding up pro-gun legislation – a charge Patrick adamantly denied.

All the attacks on fellow Republicans have drawn ire from some GOP loyalists who say West went too far in trying to raise his own political profile.

"It is now clear that Allen West's entire tenure as Texas GOP chair was intended to do only what many suspected: provide him a platform for his political future, not an opportunity to build the party," said Travis County GOP Chairman Matt Mackowiak.

West, who now lives just out-

side of Dallas, was elected to represent a Palm Beach County, Fla.-based district in Congress in 2010.

During his brief tenure in Congress, West made a habit of scolding Democrats. He made headlines when he said Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels would be impressed with the media tactics used by Democrats. As one of two Black Republicans in Congress, he called President Barack Obama "a low-level socialist agitator," according to news reports. He wrote a fellow member of Congress from Florida, Democrat Debbie Wasserman Schultz, to say she was "the most vile, unprofessional, and despicable member of the U.S. House of Representatives." At another point, he claimed to know that up to 81 members of the Democratic Party were members of the Communist Party.

The Republican-led Florida Legislature redrew the boundaries of West's district, which had included Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, and West was forced to move into a swing district.

He lost his re-election campaign despite raising \$19 million – more than any incumbent House member in the nation.

Before politics, West, a Georgia native, served in the U.S. Army for 22 years, earning a Bronze Star and other service medals before retiring as a lieutenant colonel.

But his tenure in the Army ended in controversy when he was relieved of his command in Iraq after being accused of using improv-

er methods to obtain information from an Iraqi detainee in 2003. At a military base just north of Baghdad, West was interrogating an Iraqi policeman who was believed to have information about a plot to ambush West and his troops.

When the informant didn't talk, West watched four of his soldiers beat the man. Then, Army prosecutors said, West threatened to kill the man and fired a pistol near the detainee's head to get him to talk.

"I know the method I used was not right, but I wanted to take care of my soldiers," West testified at a military judicial hearing before he was allowed to retire from the Army in 2004.

After he left Florida and moved to Texas, West said he had no intention of running for office again.

"I came back to Texas in 2014 with no intention of ever re-entering the despicable cesspool called politics," West said in a message to supporters last week.

But he said the Democratic surge in 2018 played a big role in forcing him to reconsider. Democrats that year flipped 12 seats in the Texas House, two state Senate seats and two congressional seats. Texas Republicans held their own in the 2020 elections.

"It was disconcerting to me to hear about 'turning Texas blue,' and I was committed to making sure that did not happen," West said.

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